AMERICAN UNIVERSITY STUDIES

A Modern Reader's Guide to Dante's *Inferno*

Rodney J. Payton

PETER LANG

This page intentionally left blank

This page intentionally left blank

A Modern Reader's Guide to Dante's *Inferno*

American University Studies

Series II
Romance Languages and Literature
Vol. 191

PETER LANG
New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Boston
Bern • Frankfurt am Main • Berlin • Vienna • Paris

Rodney J. Payton

A Modern Reader's Guide to Dante's *Inferno*

PETER LANG
New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Boston
Bern • Frankfurt am Main • Berlin • Vienna • Paris

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Payton, Rodney Johns.
A modern reader's guide to Dante's Inferno / Rodney J. Payton.
p. cm. — (American university studies. Series II, Romance languages and literature : vol. 191)
Intended for beginning and intermediate readers of the Inferno in English translation.
Includes bibliographical references
1. Dante Alighieri, 1265-1321. Inferno. I. Title. II. Series.
PQ4443.P38 1992 851'.1—dc20 91-43149
ISBN 0-8204-1827-7 CIP
ISSN 0740-9257

Die Deutsche Bibliothek-CIP-Einheitsaufnahme

Payton, Rodney J.:
A modern reader's guide to Dante's Inferno / Rodney J. Payton.—
New York; Berlin; Bern; Frankfurt/M.; Paris; Wien; Lang, 1992
(American university studies : Ser. 2, Romance languages and literature ; Vol. 191)
ISBN 0-8204-1827-7 ISBN 978-1-4539-0968-3 (eBook)
NE: American university studies/02

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

© 1992, 1998 Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., New York

All rights reserved.
Reprint or reproduction, even partially, in all forms such as microfilm, xerography, microfiche, microcard, offset strictly prohibited.

Printed in the United States of America.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The following publishers have generously given permission to use extended quotations from copyrighted works: From Dante Alighieri, Charles S. Singleton, translator, *The Divine Comedy*, vols. I, II, III, Bollingen Series LXXX, Copyright © 1970, 1973, 1975 by Princeton University Press. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press. Reprinted by permission of the publishers and the Loeb Classical Library from Virgil: *Aenid*, vol. I, translated by H. Rushton Fairclough, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1916; from Virgil: *Eclogues*, translated by H. Rushton Fairclough, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1916; from Statius: *Thebiad*, vol. I, translated by J. H. Mozley, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1928; from Statius: *Achilleid*, translated by J. H. Mozley, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1928; from Lucan: *The Civil War*, translated by J. D. Duff, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1928; from Ovid: *Metamorphosis*, vol. II, translated by Frank Justus Miller, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1916; from Ovid: *The Art of Love*, translated by J. H. Mozley, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard Univesity Press, 1929. From Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. From John of Salisbury, John Dickinson, translator, *The Statesman's Book of John of Salisbury*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1963. Excerpts from the *Acts* of Peter are translated by Robert Stoops and taken from the *New Testament Apocrypha* and are reprinted by permission of Polebridge Press.

This page intentionally left blank

Table of Contents

Preface xi

Chapter 1: Introduction 1

Chapter 2: Canto I. The Dark Wood: Failure and the Guide 11

Chapter 3: Canto II. The Journey Begins: The Plan of History 21

Chapter 4: Canto III. The River Crossing: God's Justice and Aristotelian "Place" 35

Chapter 5: Canto IV. Limbo: The Strife of the Pity and Dante's Bibliography 41

Chapter 6: Canto V. Francesca: The Sin of Love and the Pilgrim's Failure 47

Chapter 7: Canto V-IX. Form in *Inferno* 57

Chapter 8: Canto X. Farinata: Virgil's Quarrel with Dante 71

Chapter 9: Canto XI. Virgil's Lecture on Hell: A Review of Landmarks 79

Chapter 10: Canto XII. The Minotaur: Dante's Elaborate Relationships 91

Chapter 11: Canto XIII. Pier della Vigne: The Sin of Despair 97

Chapter 12: Canto XIV. Capaneus: Blasphemy and the Fall of Man 107

Chapter 13: Canto XV. Brunetto Latini: Sins Against Nature 117

Chapter 14: Cantos XVI-XVII. Geryon: Dante's Claim to Truthfulness 129

Chapter 15: Cantos XVIII-XIX. Fraud: Virgil's Limitations and the Corruption of the Church 139

Chapter 16: Canto XX. Fortunetelling: The Pilgrim's Triumph 151

Chapter 17: Cantos XXI-XXII. The Grafters: Humor in Hell 165

Chapter 18: Cantos XXIII-XXV. Hypocrisy and Theft: St. Thomas and the Interrelations of Sins 173

Chapter 19: Canto XXVI. Ulysses: Overreaching Presumption 193

Chapter 20: Canto XXVII. Guido da Montefeltro: Prideful Presumption 205

Chapter 21: Canto XXVIII. The Sowers of Discord: Scandal and Schism 211

Chapter 22: Cantos XXIX-XXX. Alchemy: The Pilgrim's Shameful Pleasure 219

Chapter 23: Cantos XXXI-XXXII. The Giants 227

Chapter 24: Canto XXXIII. Ugolino: Pity's Final Assault 237

Chapter 25: Canto XXXIV. The Defeat of Satan 247

Bibliography 255

This page intentionally left blank

PREFACE

This book is intended for either beginning or "intermediate" readers of the *Inferno*, that is, those who are just beginning to read the poem or those who have read it and now want to learn more about it. I assume that you are reading the poem in English.

There is a lot of information about *Inferno* available, as people have been writing about the poem ever since it appeared more than 600 years ago. However, much of the available information is diffused in scholarly journals which are difficult for most people to obtain. Most of this writing is the work of professional critics and academics and while much of it, especially recent work, is superb scholarship, it makes few concessions to readers who are not specialists or who are not competent in several foreign and ancient languages. This book draws heavily on these sources, but I have tried to put the arguments and insights of the scholars into everyday language. I have included my own thinking about the poem, ideas which have developed in eighteen years of reading and discussing Dante with my students.

Every modern English edition of *Inferno* includes a set of notes by the translator. In general, these notes are very good. The problem is that they are usually too brief. A deeper understanding of the poem requires more information than space allows the translators to include. There is another problem with "notes." Notes are keyed to the line numbers of the poem and are usually on a different page than the text itself. Nothing on the page with text refers the reader to the page with notes. New readers have no way of knowing when they should look at the notes and not recognizing a problem in the text, people tend to miss the explanation of it. This book avoids this problem by presenting a discursive discussion of each canto or group of cantos and, to the best of my knowledge and ability, brings the issues contained in the text to the attention of the reader with a longer discussion than a brief note can contain.

What translation should beginning readers use? Many are excellent. I am very fond of John Ciardi's, published by Bantam, for its beauty and cleverness. However, Ciardi sometimes does more of a paraphrase than a translation and readers can be mislead into thinking Dante said something that he didn't. Further, the edition of Ciardi's translation does not include the original Italian text. I think you should read a bilingual edition as a

smattering of Italian or even a knowledge of French will go a long way towards unlocking the beauty of the original which a translation unavoidably loses. A bilingual edition can even help teach the serious student literary Italian. For these reasons and because it is a literal translation, not a paraphrase, I suggest the translation by Charles S. Singleton published by Princeton University Press. Singleton's notes are comprehensive. Like the notes in other translations, they are keyed to the line numbers and suffer from the difficulty explained above, but they are the best source of information about specific lines in the poem available to English readers. Like other scholarly work, however, the notes are intended for a professional audience although Singleton does translate all the foreign language sources he cites into English.

This book is an introduction to the *Inferno* and also to modern scholarly opinion about it. I have included a bibliography of books and articles in English for the benefit of those who wish to read further. I have tried not to clutter the text with too much documentation, although I think the references provided will lead the student to the appropriate scholarly sources. Inclusion in the bibliography should be taken as the acknowledgment of my intellectual debt to the scholars who are cited. All of those cited there have had a role in forming my thinking about the text. If I have misrepresented their conclusions or suggestions, I apologize.

In addition to my debts to those scholars and to my students, I owe a debt to my colleagues in the Department of Liberal Studies at Western Washington University: Professors William K. B. Stoever, Ulrich H. R. Mammitzsch, William Ladson Wallace, Michael Fisher and Robert Stoops. All have shared their knowledge with me and Dr. Stoops has significantly clarified my thinking. Dr. Albert Froderberg of Mathematics, Dr. George Mariz of History and Dr. Gerard Rutan of Political Science all read the manuscript and made welcome criticisms. My family, Sandra, Gwendolyn and Elspeth, have been appropriately enthusiastic. Gwendolyn, too, read the manuscript. I am grateful for research grants on several occasions during the development of the text from the Bureau for Faculty Research here at Western and for further support through the kind offices of Dean Peter Elich of the College of Arts and Sciences. The book would not exist save for the kindness, patience and skill of Phyllis Graham and Linda Pettigrew.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Dante Alighieri's *Comedy* is a poem of great length and stupendous complexity. The key to unraveling it is an understanding of some concepts which are characteristic of the culture in which it was written and some which are central features of the mind of Dante himself. These introductory comments will describe these important features of thought in order to prepare for an intelligent reading of the poem.

Although the idea of describing a mind such as Dante's, one of the authentic geniuses of history, is a daunting and perplexing task, it is a surprisingly grateful undertaking, at least in its broader strokes, since the mind of Dante is so gratifyingly logical. The simple basic ideas we have to grasp lead to some breathtakingly complex constructs in the poem, but the ideas themselves are not complex and remain stable reference points to which we can always refer. Of course, to say that Dante's thinking is logical is not to imply that his logic is the same as that of the Twentieth Century, rather it only means that if we understand the premises with which Dante begins, we can understand how he reaches his conclusions even if we cannot always agree with them.

A preliminary concept which we must address is so basic that some may wonder at the necessity of mentioning it at all: It is simply that Dante's age was, more than anything else, a religious age. Dante and almost all of the people he knew believed in God and thought of Him in much the same way. The religious diversity of our time was not characteristic of his. Although Dante does mention some heretics in *Inferno*, they were much rarer in his time than skeptics are in ours. The reason why it is necessary to start with this is because no one will go very far in understanding Dante's poem who chooses to quarrel with his belief in God. It is not necessary to *share* Dante's medieval Christianity to feel the power of his work, but the reader must *accede* to it for the time he or she is with Dante in the poem. For some, this will be no problem at all, others will have to make some effort to enter Dante's world fully. This book, to keep things as simple as possible, will speak as if the things Dante says about God are true. Readers should understand that this does not mean that I think they necessarily share Dante's beliefs, nor should you think that of me.

Not only did Dante believe in God, he lived at a time when one of the major tasks of serious thought was to determine the nature of that God. A favorite definition of God at the time was "That being than which there can be nothing greater than" and from this definition will flow much of what we need to say in this sketch.

I have followed the following organization: First, to speak of Dante's ideas of the ethical organization of the universe, the Great Chain of Being. This will lead to the principles of plenitude and correspondence. Second, it is necessary to describe Dante's theory of literature and what he thought a text like the Divine Comedy should do. Third, I will discuss Dante's conception of history, including the principle of authority; next, the physical nature of Dante's cosmos, the Ptolemaic Universe, and finally the nature of some of Dante's other works.

The term "Great Chain of Being" (Lovejoy 1964) refers to one of the central features of Dante's universe, that is, that it is arranged as an ethical hierarchy. All beings and substances in the universe have a value which locates them on a continuum of existence which stretches from the being with the most value, God, (that which there can be nothing greater than) down through the ranks of angels (from the most noble Seraphim to the least noble, simply called Angels), through the ranks of mankind (divisible by social rank and function from the pope through kings down to the most menial serf) and through the ranks of animals and substances (gold possessing, for instance, more virtue than silver or iron). This continuum can be visualized as a chain of interlocking links. In a chain, obviously, each link is necessary for the whole. The relationship of one thing to another can be precisely demonstrated by the use of this image. Man, for instance, occupies a very special place in the Chain for he possesses characteristics which are shared, on the one hand, by the creatures below him and, on the other, by those above. In addition, man has characteristics which are uniquely his. Like the creatures below, man is mortal and must suffer death. Unlike no other mortal creature, but like the beings above him in the Chain, God and the Angels, man has an immortal soul for which he can obtain salvation and whether he does so or not determines the conditions under which that immortal part will continue to exist. Like the beings above, and unlike the creatures below, man possesses reason, which can be used to obtain salvation for the soul. Other things can be similarly located on the

Chain, but clearly the central issue is the relationship of man to God and the other created things in the universe.

How many things are there on the Chain? Which is another way of asking how many things are there in the universe? The answer is "as many things as there can be." Since God is defined as "that which there can be nothing greater than," it follows that He is self-sufficient. Being self-sufficient (having no need of anything else), he is incapable of being jealous of the being of anything else. Therefore it follows, to the medieval mind at least, that God will not deny existence to anything which can exist. This conclusion is generally called "the principle of plenitude" and means, among other things, that there are no "voids" or unused, useless places in the universe since, if there is a location, there must be, given the perfection of God, something to occupy it.

The reasoning that we have followed to reach our conclusion in the preceding paragraph is *deductive* in nature. We began with a general principle (the necessary perfection of God) and reasoned from there to a specific fact (that the universe has no waste places). All people frequently think in a deductive manner, and it is the mode of sophisticated mathematics where particular cases are compared to general principles. But please note that modern scientific thinking is very frequently *inductive* in the experimental stage before the general principles are established. We modern people tend to begin with a specific fact or observation (the ball falls to the floor when released) and reason from that to a general conclusion about the universe (there is an attractive force between all masses in the universe). To us, the scientific frame of mind requires that general conclusions about the universe always be open to question. Dante's thinking, and the thinking of his era is much more likely to be deductive than inductive and the deductive principles with which thinking starts are far less likely to be questioned than they are in our own time. Anselm's definition of God, "that being than which there can be nothing greater than," is a good example of a deductive principle which came to be taken for granted. Intellectuals would try to make any other "facts" about the universe which they might observe agree with that deductive principle rather than challenge it as modern science might do. This is why Dante's age is such an age of orthodoxy.

You can see how the principle of plenitude is a deduction from the definition of God. Like it, the principle of correspondence follows from the

definition of God and deals with the relationship between things in the continuum of existence. It works like this: God creates all things in the universe out of his goodness. Therefore all things in the universe share, inasmuch as they are able, in that goodness. It follows (deductive logic again, God's creation is all good) that nothing in the universe is in and of itself bad, merely that some things share less of God's goodness than others. God does not, for instance, deny existence to poisonous snakes simply because they are not capable of sharing very much in His goodness. This important idea explains why there is evil in a world created by a perfectly good God. Evil is merely a lack of goodness, rather than a thing in itself. In addition, to Dante and his age, the whole created universe, since all things in it are more or less good, is capable of reminding or teaching man of the absolute goodness of God. Man can experience the material universe around him (see its goodness) and through it be brought to contemplate the immaterial spiritual universe which he cannot experience directly. Everything in the material portion of the Chain of Being *corresponds* to some aspect of the spiritual portion and, ultimately, to some aspect of God. In a way, the universe is a *mirror* of God. Here is a familiar example: Man, says the Bible, was made in the image of God. Therefore, to Dante's time the physical aspect of mankind was a visible reminder of the being of God. In a similar way, the ideal state (for Dante a monarchy, ruled by a king who has everything and therefore no desires) is a model (imperfect, because man is fallen) of the government of Heaven itself. Here is how a twelfth century Bishop, John of Salisbury, combines these two correspondences to speak of proper government and social order and their relationship to divinity. At the same time, he lays out the chain of man's social being and shows how it corresponds to the Great Chain of Being which is found reflected in the organization of the human body:

> A commonwealth, according to Plutarch, is a certain body which is endowed with life by the benefit of divine favor, which acts at the prompting of the highest equity, and is ruled by what may be called the moderating power of reason. Those things which establish and implant in us the practice of religion and transmit to us the worship of God...fill the place of the soul in the body of the commonwealth. And therefore those who preside over the practice of religion should be looked up to and venerated as the soul of the body. For who doubts that the ministers of God's

> holiness are his representatives? Furthermore, since the soul is, as it were, the prince of the body, and has rulership over the whole thereof, so those whom our author calls the prefects of religion preside over the entire body...The place of the head in the body of the commonwealth is filled by the prince, who is subject only to God and to those who exercise His office and who represent Him on earth, even as in the human body the head is quickened and governed by the soul. The place of the heart is filled by the senate, from which proceeds the initiation of good works and ill. The duties of ears, eyes and tongue are claimed by the judges and governors of provinces. Officials and soldiers correspond to the hands. Those who always attend upon the prince are likened to the sides. Financial officers and keepers...may be compared with the stomach and intestines, which if they become congested through excessive avidity, and retain too tenaciously their accumulations, generate innumerable and incurable diseases, so that through their ailment the whole body is threatened with destruction. The husbandmen correspond to the feet, which always cleave to the soil, and need the more especially the care and foresight of the head, since while they walk upon the earth doing service with their bodies, they meet the more often with stones of stumbling, and therefore deserve aid and protection all the more justly since it is they who raise, sustain, and move forward the weight of the entire body.

In John's simple example, the whole theory of proper government can be reviewed merely by thinking through the structure of the body. This technique of remembering things is called a "place memory system" (in such a system one relates important things one wants to remember to physical locations) and was common in Dante's time. In fact, the Comedy is a giant place memory system as we shall see.

Because of the principle of correspondence, Dante's cosmos was filled with signs and visible manifestations of divinity. Confronted with so many reminders, human reason, one of man's Godlike characteristics, should lead him to seek to approach that divinity and seek salvation. In this sense, the *Inferno* is a drama of how the God-given gift of reason awakens man's conscience and works to move him towards salvation.

The principle of correspondence is important to an understanding of what Dante thought a work of literature should do. It follows from the

preceding discussion that if man is an imperfect reflection of God himself, then man's works are an imperfect imitation of God's works. Dante's *Divine Comedy* is a cosmos unto itself; it describes the workings of the entire universe. It is not God's universe, as becomes clear as we read the poem, but it corresponds to God's real universe. Another way of saying this is to say that Dante's universe which he depicts in the *Comedy* is an analog of the real universe. Dante's analogous universe exhibits a kind of plenitude in that it is like a catalog which enumerates and demonstrates the relationships between the things it lists, so that it has internal correspondences. As the reader progresses through the "catalog" of the *Divine Comedy* each part illuminates previously dark aspects of other parts in a process of continuous discovery. Furthermore, meaning in Dante's poem exhibits a hierarchy of ethical value which is similar to the hierarchical nature of the Great Chain. Dante said that his text in the *Divine Comedy* was like the text of the Bible itself in that it functions on four ascending levels of meaning. The first level is the literal where words mean exactly what they say. When, in the first canto of *Inferno* Dante writes that he saw a little hill with the light shining on it, and that he felt that ascending the hill would lead him to safety, we can take that exactly as any newspaper report in our own time. But the second level of meaning for Dante is the allegorical which is related to the principle of correspondence in that everything in the text can point outside itself to something else. This proceeds according to a system of iconology, a kind of vocabulary of symbols, which is well understood even today. In this example, it is safe to take light to stand for knowledge. To climb the hill, to get into the light, is to obtain knowledge or wisdom. Likewise the direction of motion, up, signifies improvement since God is "up" both in location and in value from man. Our little example then can be seen as a simple allegory of striving to obtain knowledge to make oneself safe from ignorance. The next level of meaning is a moral level. Here perhaps that people automatically know they *should* strive after knowledge. The fourth level is the anagogic or spiritual level of meaning in which we are to understand that the text tells us something of a spiritual or transcendent nature. This level is the most difficult and it may be that our example is too simple to contain such a meaning (Dante doesn't claim that all parts of his texts contain all four levels). Much of the enjoyment of reading the *Divine Comedy* consists in unraveling such mysteries.

There is a third deductive principle to which we now must turn, the principle of authority. To Dante, there were certain figures in human history who represented the peaks of human achievement and to whose opinions and works much deference was to be shown. It is not that such figures were incapable of error since, being human, they surely could err, it is that Dante took these outstanding people to be particular instruments of the will of God and, therefore, they were to be treated with the greatest respect. In the *Inferno*, the most important authorities are Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, and Virgil, the Roman poet. It is important to see that these two figures, both pagans, are part of God's plan which culminates in Christianity and the Church of Rome. Dante claims in his *Convivio* that David (out of whose line Christ was to come) was born in the same year that Aeneas (the hero of Virgil's epic *Aeneid*) set sail from Troy to Italy where he was to found the city of Rome which was to become the seat of Christianity. Thus history has two tributaries: a pagan Greek and Roman stream merges with a Hebrew stream to form the great river of Christianity which can carry all men to salvation. Nothing in history is a dead end since it is all part of God's scheme. In the *Inferno* Dante relies almost exclusively on pagan authority to find his way using the power of reason which is available to all men without the direct intervention of God. In the other two books of the *Comedy* he deals with biblical Christian authority which add divine grace to pagan reason.

We have now seen how Dante's intellectual universe is organized symbolically through the Chain of Being and the principles of plenitude, correspondence and authority. Now we must look at it in its physical aspect. The model of the physical universe in which Dante and his age believed is known as the Ptolemaic universe since it came to medieval astronomers in the work of Ptolemy of Alexandria who wrote in about 150 AD. Ptolemy said that in writing his book he drew upon the ancient Greek astronomers and for this reason, Ptolemy was taken to be an authority of a very important sort since the other stream of history, the Hebrew, contains very little astronomical information at all. Ptolemy's book was accordingly called the *Almagest* or "Great Work." (*Almagest* is an Arabic word and is the root of the English word "almanac.")

Much of what you need to know of the Ptolemaic universe can be seen by looking at the illustration of the universe in any modern edition of *Inferno*. The universe is explained in very common sense terms as would be agreed

upon by peoples who did not possess any instruments of observation save their naked senses. The universe is geocentric, earth centered, with all the other heavenly bodies traveling about the earth in perfect circles. There are ten spheres, seven of them carrying one of the known planets (with the sun and the moon being counted as "planets"). Beyond the sphere of Saturn, the last planet, is the sphere of the fixed stars. That is, those heavenly bodies which travel in eternal fixed patterns (constellations) unlike the wandering paths of the planets. All of these spheres travel in perfect circles about the earth, but they are not perfectly concentric. For certain technical reasons certain eccentricities in their rotation had to be allowed, but since ancient philosophy held that the prime mover (the *Primum Mobile*, the outermost sphere, which imparted motion to all the others) has to be in essence the simplest, Ptolemy posited the existence of a tenth sphere, devoid of any bodies, which did rotate in a perfect circle with the earth exactly at the center. Beyond the last sphere is the empyrean or region of fire where God himself was said to have his being. Ptolemy's astronomical model is a system which serves to aid in keeping an accurate calendar and in navigation. It does these tasks perfectly well given periodic correction of errors in the position of the various celestial bodies. However, the principle of correspondence, in which all created things must point to God, will not let the matter rest there; further significances must be developed.

First, Aristotle's physics, authoritative at the time, held that there were different rules for motion in the heavens than for motion on Earth. "Proper" motion for celestial bodies was circular. Whereas on Earth proper motion was a straight line. The orbit of the moon was the dividing line between the two areas. Below the orbit of the moon, everything seems to be in constant flux. All things seem to be impermanent and undergoing change usually in the direction of decay. Above the orbit of the moon things seem to be permanent and changeless. The stars apparently repeat their endless dance unalterably for eternity. The Church, understandably enough given the operation of the principles above, proceeded to make a moral allegory of this appearance so that the heavens become a visible reminder of the unalterable, eternal state to which one aspires in contrast to the world of change and decay which one inhabits.

Other features of the Ptolemaic universe are laden with ethical significance. The Earth, motionless at the center of the universe, can be taken in two ways: First, its central location can be seen as a sign of its

centrality in the concern of God, but, secondly, its remoteness from the Empyrean (the "location" of God) is a sign of the great gulf which exists between sinful man and the divine Creator. By allegorizing in this way, medieval people turned the model of the universe into a moral "map" (that is, a "place-memory system") with ethical values spatially located on it. Dante's Hell, Purgatory and Paradise are elaborations of this mapping process and learning the map and the significance of the moral locations upon it is one of the reader's tasks in understanding the poem.

It remains now to say a few words about some of Dante's other works. They are the *Vita Nuova*, the *Convivio*, the *Letter to Can Grande* and *De Monarchia*. The first of these, the *Vita Nuova* or "New Life," is a short collection of poems and their explanations, written according to an elaborate prescription of manners and custom, to and about a young woman, Beatrice whom Dante knew in Florence. This work will be discussed in more detail later, but for now you should know that, given the impulse to allegorize and explain the significance of things, Dante makes of this woman a symbol of divine grace and credits her appearance and example with the power of turning men's thoughts to God. After her death, with her immediate example no longer available to him, Dante turned to the study of philosophy which he characterized as another beautiful young woman to whom he addressed the same form of poetry he had addressed to Beatrice. This is the subject matter of the *Convivio* or "Banquet." Even though one of the most important conclusions of the entire *Divine Comedy* is that "My Lady Philosophy" cannot take the place of divine grace, the *Convivio* contains much information which is necessary to read the *Divine Comedy* including the theory of levels of meaning we have discussed, the principles of plenitude and authority with attention to the place of Artistotle whom Dante calls "the Philosopher," and his theory of history as a plan in the mind of God. The *Letter to Can Grande* is the dedicatory statement of *Paradiso* which Dante wrote to the Veronese nobleman who sheltered him in his exile from Florence. It restates some of the theory of allegory which is found is found in *Convivio* and tells of some specific principles of the organization and purposes of the *Divine Comedy*. *De Monarchia* (On Monarchy) advances Dante's theory that the world should be governed by an absolute ruler, an emperor, who would have everything and need nothing. In this regard he would be a human imitation of God. This ruler would have absolute control over all of man's secular business. The pope at Rome, on

the other hand, would be poor and divorced from the material things of the world. He would attend to man's spiritual needs. Dante believed that this division of government would assure the peace of the world and allow mankind both to pursue the good things of this life and to achieve salvation in the life to come.

With this information the modern reader is ready to accompany Dante the Poet and Pilgrim on his great adventure. Nearly any edition of Dante's poem will include a biographical sketch detailing what is known about him and this should be read since *Inferno* is biographical as well as philosophical.

CHAPTER 2

Canto I

The Dark Wood: Failure and the Guide

While we can follow literal sequence of events in Canto I well enough, the reader should not expect to be able to penetrate the symbolic meaning of the events and images until a wider experience of Dante's universe and the art with which he expresses it has been gained. As we move through the narration, following the Pilgrim and his guide, the poem itself will teach us how to interpret it. In the beginning the poem is obscure, but its dim scenes are possessed of so much potential that they have excited the appetite of readers for understanding ever since the poem's appearance. The obscurity of the beginning is a part of Dante's plan; that later events will make things clearer is an explicit promise of the first few lines, "But, to treat of the good I found in it, I will tell of the other things I saw there" (Canto I, Lines 8—9). The dark wood is not further described than in the first seven lines, yet by the end of the *Inferno* we will well understand what place it was.

What will happen is that later events and allusions in the poem will cause the reader to reflect back on earlier parts and to constantly readjust his or her previous understanding. This is a vital component of Dante's method and an important element in the way he conceived that history itself worked. For instance, the Old Testament was taken to prefigure the New with figures and events "pointing" outside themselves to events that, in God's divine scheme of history, were to happen later. Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 was thought to prefigure the crucifixion of Christ with Isaac symbolizing man doomed to death, who is spared by the alternate sacrifice of the ram, symbolizing Christ, which is offered in his place. This process demonstrates that all of human history has meaning in God's divine plan, that the present moment reveals the meaning of the past and vice versa. The experience of coming to understand earlier parts of the poem in the light of later experience is one of the major pleasures the *Divine Comedy* provides the reader.

The first two lines of the poem introduce two major figures of the *Comedy* and constitute an example of how carefully the poem must be read: "Midway in the journey of *our* life / found myself in a dark wood". The two figures are all of us collectively and Dante, a particular individual. Allegorically, all people undertake the journey of a life and Dante, in this role called "the Pilgrim," by commentators, stands in the allegory for the traveler on the journey from birth to death. This device is ordinary enough in medieval drama where "Everyman" is a frequent figure, but Dante enriches this commonplace by pointing out that it is he, Dante the Poet, a literal person, who finds himself in the dark wood. Everyman must sin, Everyman for the sake of his soul must seek the grace of salvation, but every man's story is unique. Dante intends to express both the common features of human experience and the uniqueness of the story of Dante Alighieri, this particular pilgrim. The tension between the roles Dante, both Everyman and individual traveler, has in the poem written by Dante Alighieri of Florence (The "Poet") is one of the major dramatic devices of the work. Dante tells us that he, the Pilgrim, lost *his* way midway in *our* life's journey. Psalm 90:10 tells us that the span of a life is 70 years. Dante is then 35. The year is 1300.

Dante the Pilgrim, then, is lost in a dark wood, which we, who share his humanity could very well find ourselves in also and in some sense, but not necessarily the same sense, do. Dante is in the "dark wood" because he has wandered from the "straight way." These images are clear enough being very usual in western literature. The straight road is righteousness and the dark wood error, confusion and sin. Dante makes no attempt to describe the straight road, but he does say that it is "hard to tell what the wood was" (4—5). On the journey, the Pilgrim's development will include an increase in his poetic ability His poetic power will develop as his understanding of the Divine Mystery increases. Later in the poem, possessed of his full powers by the grace of God, he will be able to approach describing the ineffable. Here, his inability to describe the dark wood indicates his confusion and his sinful state.

Still, Dante does say that the thought of the wood "renews the fear!" (6) which brings up yet another character in the poem. Readers will realize that the person speaking here must be the Poet who is writing the poem, remembering his experience. Sometimes the Poet will speak directly to the reader and it is important to distinguish between him and the Pilgrim who is the person *in* the poem. The fear, which the memory of the wood renews

for the Poet, is (unknown to the Pilgrim yet) a positive factor, since his struggle towards the light is motivated by it. Had he not feared the dark wood, he might have stayed in it and been destroyed. The fear is a gift of God, which is not perceived as a good at the time it functions as a good (Spraycar 1978). Later, the Pilgrim will understand this, but he does not at the beginning of the poem.

The reason his perceptions are insufficient to the moment is revealed, allegorically, in the next lines (10—12). He is "full of sleep." To Dante, sleep is the symbol of an irrational condition of the mind. Reason itself, even without revelation, could prompt a healthy fear of damnation which would serve to keep one on the "straight road." Later we will learn that Hell is filled with the souls of those who have "lost the good of intellect" (III, 18) and that the easiest sins to fall into (and avoid) are those that involve a simple loss of rational control. Dante is lost, in both a literal and figurative sense, because of some sort of failure of reason. The one advantage left to him is that he is aware enough to be afraid, although he says the fear is "bitter." Nevertheless, it is his fear that prompts him to make an effort to save himself.

He sees a little hill bathed in sunlight, and the sight somewhat reassures him as well it might, laden as it is with powerful positive symbols. First, the hill itself, at the end of the valley, represents an upward direction and "up" in medieval cosmology is away from the center of the Earth, the site of Hell, and towards God, thus good. Secondly, the hill is bathed in the light of the sun and the sun is a common symbol of knowledge and reason in medieval literature. Thus light, which Dante, "full of sleep," needs, beckons him upward, the proper direction.

However, the Pilgrim's perceptions are incorrect as the Poet is careful to let the reader know. Stemming from the traditions of the Church is the idea that while knowledge exists in this world, certain forms of it are insufficient; knowledge can lead one to God, but cannot accomplish the salvation of the soul itself. Salvation, which man can neither deserve nor earn by any act of his own, including the effort to understand, can only come as a gift of God. To understand Dante's symbol of the hill, it is important to realize that he sees the light of the sun resting on the shoulders of the hill. He does not see the sun itself. Many scholars (Cassell 1976) think that the hill represents earthly philosophy which Dante, the Poet, was enthralled with during a significant portion of his life. The *Convivio* is a